

Moscow's Waiting Game

By JAMES RESTON

WASHINGTON, May 11—The Soviets are playing a very clever waiting game with President Nixon. They are spanking him publicly for his latest air offensive against North Vietnam, but corresponding with him privately, allowing their officials to get their pictures taken with him at the White House, and acting in general like disappointed friends dealing with a misguided and reckless child.

Their diplomatic note on the Vietnam crisis is a masterpiece of hypocrisy, defending the principles of international law which they defy whenever it suits their purposes, condemning Mr. Nixon for using force against the weapons shipped into Haiphong, and howling against the American blockade as if Moscow were merely engaged in nothing more than the innocent passage of food for hungry children.

The worried men in the White House, of course, are delighted with all this. Moscow didn't respond to their ultimatum with a bang. Maybe the Nixon visit to Moscow will go on after all, they hope, and by the end of the month, there will be agreements, signed on television in the Kremlin, on the control of strategic arms, more U. S.-Soviet trade and cultural relations, space cooperation, and a European security conference.

All this is not only possible but likely. For the Soviets have good reason to believe that they and their allies have already won the long struggle for Vietnam, and can now wait for the forthcoming battles around Hue and Kontum to come to their bloody conclusions.

Moscow is in no hurry. It is on the point of a critical treaty over Berlin with the West Germans, who are in a political crisis over signing that treaty, and Germany and Berlin are more important to the Soviet Union than Vietnam. Nothing could block the Berlin pact quicker than a sudden test of strength between Washington and Moscow over Haiphong, so the Soviets are avoiding the confrontation and having their pictures taken in the White House, and planning for the Nixon visit to Moscow, and waiting for the German vote and the outcome of the battle in Vietnam for Hue.

Moscow takes no chance by waiting and pretending to be generous. It has already delivered enough tanks, artillery, fuel and anti-aircraft guns to Hanoi to give the North Vietnamese a chance to take Hue and demoralize the South Vietnamese Army and Government; and even if Hanoi and the Vietcong don't make it in the next month, which they probably won't, Moscow still has other alternatives.

It can always go back to Peking and ship arms by rail from the Soviet Union through China to Hanoi, and this is one of the ironies of the Nixon policy, for despite his spectacular mission to Peking and his planned visit to

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Moscow, he has taken such dramatic action against the North Vietnamese that he has almost forced the quarrel-ing Communist giants to get together to supply Hanoi across the trans-Siberian railroad and down through China to North Vietnam.

President Nixon, and the Secretaries of State and Defense, but not, noticeably, Henry Kissinger, have been saying publicly that the United States will take "whatever action is necessary" to stop the flow of Communist arms to Hanoi, not only by mining the Haiphong harbor but also by bombing the supplies on the Moscow-Peking-Hanoi railroad line.

This at a time when Mr. Nixon is shaking his fist at Moscow, planning to go there on May 22, boasting about his new friendly relationship with Peking, backing General Thieu in Saigon, and withdrawing his troops from Vietnam as fast as he can—in short fighting a political war at home and a complicated war in Vietnam.

No wonder, then, that the Soviets have played it all cool and cozy. They understand the President's problems at home and abroad. They want the settlement in Berlin. They want the agreements with the United States on trade and nuclear arms control. They want a European security arrangement for Washington to withdraw some or all its troops between the Ruhr and the Elbe, and they're not too worried about Vietnam.

For they think they have won there, and are even trying without much success to convince Hanoi not to press their military advantages too far. Moscow gives the impression that it is rather satisfied with things as they are. It is willing to let the world see Mr. Nixon take dramatic military action at Haiphong and avoid any spectacular military response itself.

In another time, the Germany of Hitler would have picked up Mr. Nixon's challenge at Haiphong and brought the world to the edge of the precipice, but the Soviets have been less spectacular. They have provided the arms and left the battle to Hanoi, and put it up to Mr. Nixon to make up the difference, if he can.

Meanwhile, they have not challenged, but merely chided the President. They have not said he could not come to Moscow to talk about other larger questions. They have left him to decide whether he wants to call off the summit, and use "whatever means are necessary" to stop the flow of arms by rail from the U.S.S.R. through China to North Vietnam.

In short, they are condemning the mining of Haiphong but avoiding the challenge Mr. Nixon thought might bring the war to an end, and letting him try to prove how his blockade will stop the battle for Hue, and figure out where to go from here.